

“The undiscovered country”: Philip Pullman and the ‘Land of the Dead’

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## 1. SPACE

Making his well-known distinction between ‘sacred’ and ‘profane’ space, Mircea Eliade takes as his example a church in the street of a modern city, and differentiates the church building from its ordinary circumambient environment:

For a believer, the church shares in a different space from the street in which it stands ... The threshold that separates the two spaces also indicates the distance between two modes of being, the profane and the religious. The threshold is the limit, the boundary, the frontier that distinguishes and opposes two worlds – at the same time the paradoxical place where those worlds communicate, where passage from the profane to the sacred world becomes possible.<sup>1</sup>

In this model ‘sacred’ space is rich, complex, open; ‘profane’ space is closed, one-dimensional, homogenous. Later discussions distinguish in a comparable way between ‘place’ and ‘non-place’. According to anthropologist Marc Auge, ‘place’ is ‘relational, historical and concerned with identity’.<sup>2</sup> ‘Non-place’ is the supermarket, the hotel, the shopping mall, places that are everywhere and nowhere. ‘Non-place’ is a dead end, leading only back into itself. You could be anywhere; you are nowhere. Or non-place is a temporary and transitional space, lying between point of departure and destination.<sup>3</sup> Such places mediate without filling, connect without explaining, and provide spaces of temporary occupation merely for the restless indeterminacy of waiting. ‘Transit points as temporary abodes are proliferating under luxurious or inhuman conditions’, says Auge: the vacancy of the airport, the motorway service station; or ‘the misery of refugee camps’, squats, shanty towns.<sup>4</sup>

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What differentiates ordinary space from the consecrated space of the church is the quality of place. The church is literally, as Albert Rouet puts it, ‘un espace saint’,<sup>5</sup> holy ground: but less for what it contains than for what it signifies, alludes to, gestures

towards. To undertake passage from the profane to the sacred is to cross into a place that is not a dead end, but an aperture; not a limit, but a horizon; not a refuge, but a place filled with 'images of an opening'.<sup>6</sup> The church should be, in Philip Sheldrake's words, 'a doorway or access point'<sup>7</sup> to another world. Eliade:

The experience of sacred space makes possible the 'founding of the world': where the sacred manifests itself in space, *the real unveils itself*, the world comes into existence. But the irruption of the sacred does not only project a fixed point into the formless fluidity of profane space, a center into chaos; it also effects a break in plane, that is, it opens communication between the cosmic planes.<sup>8</sup>

We will recur continually to that 'break in plane', or as Eliade terms it elsewhere, a 'break in the homogeneity of space'.<sup>9</sup> The notion that sacred space is characterised not by fixity, rootedness, stability, but by lability, plasticity, capacity to open the imagination to otherness, coheres with current discussions of Christianity and place. As Philip Sheldrake observed, Christianity is not founded on land or temple but on an event and a person.<sup>10</sup> The event of Jesus was a coming and a going; the place of Jesus is an empty tomb. 'He is' by definition '*not here*' (Matt. 28:6).

Hence to be a Christian is, in John Bunyan's words 'A pilgrim for to be',<sup>11</sup> and the sacred space of the church is peregrine, or as Rouet puts it, 'un lieux orienté'.<sup>12</sup> The altar faces East, upwards and beyond, towards God in Christ. Churches, says Philip Sheldrake, following Rouet, are not built for teaching or theatre, but for pilgrimage.<sup>13</sup> Our sacred itinerary follows the text of the gospels, where holy places move around, come and go, and no place guarantees access to the divine. 'L'espace sacré', says Rouet, 'est celui des nomades de Dieu'.<sup>14</sup> Place may be, as Heidegger puts it 'the house of being', but Christian 'being' is nomadic, dispersed, itinerant: 'le christianisme est un religion sans espace delimitée'.<sup>15</sup>

Place, embodied space, is for Christians the scene of a great departure, a current absence, and a hoped-for return. Each of us, de Certeau affirms, 'with the certainty of what is lacking, knows of every place and object that it is *not that*, one cannot stay *there* and be content with *that*'.<sup>16</sup> Despite the fact that the Incarnation revealed, in

Sheldrake's words, a 'commitment by God to place and time',<sup>17</sup> this tension between the local and the universal abides. The places we love most are those that most manifestly empty themselves of significance in favour of the divine that irrupts into them. What Eliot called 'the point of intersection of the timeless/ With time' is a 'moment in' but also a moment 'out of time',<sup>18</sup> since the timeless (and placeless) is neither bounded, nor bound. Hans Sedlmayr describes the Byzantine church as mapping a sacred geography aligning the church with the universal, orienting it with respect to heaven and hell:

The interior of the church is the universe. The altar is Paradise, which lay in the East ... the West, on the contrary, is the realm of darkness, of grief, of death, the realm of the eternal mansions of the dead, who await the resurrection of the flesh and the Last Judgement.<sup>19</sup>

Microcosmically the church opens outwards to reveal these mysteries of the universe to which it is open and pointing.<sup>20</sup> This is a temporal as well as a spatial line, since the subject, the worshipper, is constituted here as directed, aligned, facing the future in the East ('oriente'), and turning his back on the wreckage of the past, averting her eyes from the 'eternal mansions of the dead'. Grotesquely the church is imagined here almost as a moving vessel, carrying the faithful towards the orient sun, flying to outpace the sequent shadow of mortality. But God is in the one as surely as He is in the other. Christ descended into Hell prior to his ascent into Heaven. The eternal mansions of the dead have a place reserved for us all, before we can hope to reach that other place, the place once promised and prepared: 'I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am' (John 14:3). If the church as a sacred place facilitates commerce between the human and the divine, 'communication with the world of the gods',<sup>21</sup> then it must act as a portal to the eternities of life and death; must 'centre' (Emily Brontë's phrase) 'both the worlds of heaven and hell',<sup>22</sup> must find, or create, some kind of space for the dead.

## **PULLMAN IN HELL**

Critical readings of Philip Pullmans' *His Dark Materials* trilogy<sup>23</sup> have tended to focus on the Gnostic<sup>24</sup> theme of the Second Fall, in which the heroine Lyra plays the

role of a Sophia or New Eve, falling into knowledge and experience, rectifying the initial estrangement of Original Sin.<sup>25</sup> Pullman systematically inverts Christian orthodoxy, exposing God the Father as a usurping false creator ('The Authority'), condemning the church as a 'monolithic',<sup>26</sup> 'powerful and punitive'<sup>27</sup> system based on lies, torture and even murder; and redefining Paradise and the Fall in terms of an illegitimate authority seeking to suppress natural human curiosity and instinct. 'The effect of this', writes Anne-Marie Bird, 'is to transpose what is, in traditional Christian readings, a paradigm of disobedience and divine punishment into a scheme of self-development'.<sup>28</sup> Thus the great 'War in Heaven' conducted by Lyra's father, Lord Asriel, against the Authority, and the Second Fall in which the children are the leading protagonists, are linked aspects of the same great humanist revolution, 'this world's opportunity', as Naomi Wood puts it, 'to replay that drama'.<sup>29</sup>

But one key episode in this cosmic drama is undervalued by this stress on the Gnostic structure of the trilogy: that is the journey Lyra and Will undertake in *The Amber Spyglass* to the Land of the Dead. Drawing, as Millicent Lenz observes, on both classical and Christian sources,<sup>30</sup> Pullman provides a contemporary version of the archetypal voyage to the underworld. Given the emphasis on Gnostic themes, the journey to the Land of the Dead tends to be read merely as an episode in the overall denouement of the trilogy. It is not perceived as the main achievement of the protagonists, or as the imaginative centre of the novel. Yet in my view the journey to the Land of the Dead is both the narrative climax, and the most fully realised imaginative achievement of the novels. By contrast the War in Heaven and the Second Fall represent disappointing and anti-climactic narrative resolutions. The Authority has no true power, and disintegrates at a touch, though his regent Metatron proves harder to destroy.<sup>31</sup> The Fall brings only a moment of Paradise regained, which is followed almost immediately by a re-expulsion, as Lyra and Will are obliged to return, each to his or her own separate world. It is not in Heaven or in Paradise, but in the underworld, that Pullman's imagination truly flourishes. The heart of the *Dark Materials* trilogy, I propose to argue, lies in Pullman's modern version of the Christian Harrowing of Hell.

## DESCENSUS AD INFEROS

Classical descent journeys are either for the purpose of seeking information, or with the intention of delivering one of the dead from bondage in the underworld. The paradigmatic descent narratives of Homer and Virgil belong to the former type. Thus Odysseus journeys to the mouth of the underworld and opens a portal (cuts a hole, we might say, in this world, at a point adjacent to the next) to locate and consult Tiresias, who has by special dispensation of Persephone retained his prophetic foreknowledge. Odysseus conducts a ritual that brings the ghosts of the dead up to the surface, digging a trench and pouring into it libations of honey, barley, and wine. Then he slaughters a black sheep, since only the taste of sacrificial blood can sufficiently revitalise ghosts to enable them to converse. This ritual does more than 'give a voice to the past'; it can also, as Jurgen Pieters, following Aristotle, says of literature, 'enable us to listen to its absent representatives and, more extraordinarily, to converse them'.<sup>32</sup>

When Odysseus meets his dead mother, her spirit eludes his proffered embrace. The narrative focus of the *descensus* is here on confronting and articulating the grief of bereavement. Odysseus' mother speaks of the great impassible gulf of separation that lies between them; of the fundamental difference between living and dead; of the impossibility of corporeal contact between them. What the narrative achieves, however, is to construct from those mourning emotions of grief, anger, resentment against injustice, a place of meeting, on the border between life and death, where the dead can speak, and where through a 'break in plane' an impossible communication can take place. Absence gives birth to presence, separation to reunion, as the poetic imagination makes space for the dead.

The object of the journey in both the *Odyssey* and Virgil's *Aeneid* is to acquire information; but the discovery the journey entails is to embrace the pain of loss. The educational content of the journey is this speaking with the dead; and the moral of the journey is to realise that what the dead need from us is, as Michelet put it, someone to speak for them, a *poeta vates* to give voice to what they can no longer utter.

It is not only an urn and tears which these dead ask of you. It is not enough for them that we take their sighs upon ourselves. It is not a mourner they would have, it is a sooth-sayer, a *vates*. So long as they have no such person, they will wander about their ill-sealed graves and find no rest.<sup>33</sup>

This is more than fidelity to a memory, or just bearing someone in mind. It is closer to Derrida's 'justice': 'a responsibility of the living, and it is *responsibility*, beyond all living present, within that which disjoins the living present, before the ghosts of those who are not yet born or who are already dead'.<sup>34</sup>

This emphasis on the dead, imagined<sup>35</sup> as an unstable, untenable, elusive presence, is naturally even more pronounced in those ancient stories in which one of the living travels to the underworld to rescue or recover a dead friend or lover. The story of Orpheus and Eurydice is the story of a double bereavement, of 'second death'<sup>36</sup> and of love twice lost. Dealings with the dead can on the other hand end in compromise, such as those *descensus* myths, probably beginning with Ishtar and Tammuz, that explain the alternation of the seasons. Every year Tammuz died, 'passing away from the cheerful earth to the gloomy subterranean world, and ... every year his divine mistress journeyed in quest of him ... to the land from which there is no returning, to the house of darkness, where dust lies on door and bolt'.<sup>37</sup> The most powerful of these myths is the story of Demeter's search for her daughter Persephone, abducted by Hades and taken to the underworld, which ends in a negotiated compromise: Persephone will stay in the kingdom of the dead for six months of the year, and live on earth for the other six. The potentiality of this myth for later Christian writers lies of course in the archetype of resurrection, of liberation from death, of return from the land of the dead. In *Paradise Lost*, using the Latinized names Ceres, Proserpina and Dis (his immediate source was Ovid), Milton applied the myth to his theme of Fall and Redemption. Tending her garden, Eve resembles '*Prosperpin* gathring flours', who

Her self a fairer Floure by gloomie *Dis*  
Was gatherd, which cost *Ceres* all that pain  
To seek her through the world ...

Here Milton conflates Greek mystery religion, Roman mythology, Old Testament narrative and New Testament revelation. The story of Persephone and Hades is applied to the Jewish story of Eve tempted by Satan, captured and doomed to death; and used to foreshadow the future Christian narrative of the Redemption of the world. Ceres here is a Graeco-Roman divinity, looking for her daughter; the Jewish God,

caring for his erring creation; and Christ, who seeks his daughter humanity through the world, journeys to the underworld to bring her back, endures ‘all that pain’ to save her from eternity in the dark.<sup>38</sup>

## HARROWING OF HELL

The Christian version of the *descensus ad inferos*, known from mediaeval terminology as the ‘Harrowing of Hell’, is clearly modelled on these classical narratives, but differs significantly in its objectives and in the pattern of its resolution. Jesus does not descend into Hell in order to acquire information; or, despite, the tender intimacy entailed in his liberation of Adam and Eve, to find or rescue a particular person. The literary adaptations follow the Christological mission to the underworld as outlined in writings from the earliest Christian centuries. After the Crucifixion, Jesus went to Hell to preach to, and liberate, the dead.

Or did He? The *descensus* has hardly any definite basis in the canonical scriptures. Jesus after his death is said to have ‘preached to the spirits in prison’ (1 Peter 1: 3 19-20), and elsewhere in the same epistle ‘the gospel was preached to the dead’ (1 Peter 4:6). According to Paul, he descended to the lower, earthly regions; and when he ascended on high, he led a host of captives (Eph. 4:8). From the Cross he promises to deliver from death the penitent thief (Luke 23:42-4). This is the ‘meagre information of Scripture’, as Hans Urs von Balthasar puts it, from which the Harrowing of Hell, ‘an entire drama with the underworld as its *mis-en-scene*’, evolved.<sup>39</sup>

Notwithstanding the paucity of explicit scriptural identification, the Harrowing is an ancient Christian tradition. It is found in Arian creeds of the East, for instance at the Fourth Synod of Sirmium (359):

He died and descended into the parts beneath the earth, and regulated the things there, whom the gatekeepers of hell saw and shuddered ...<sup>40</sup>

But it is generally assumed to have been part of an older confessional tradition, as suggested by its inclusion in (or incorporation into) the Apostles’ Creed. The phrase ‘*descendit ad inferna*’ appears in Rufinus’ commentary on the creed of the church of

Aquileia.<sup>41</sup> The *descensus* is mentioned by Irenaeus, Marcion, Origen, Clement of Alexandria and Augustine. It is not in the very earliest forms of the creed, nor does it appear in all (it is absent from the Nicene Creed). Yet all the basic elements of the Harrowing narrative - the triumphant entry into hell, the subjugation of Hades, the binding of Satan, the leading forth of the captives - are present in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century *Paschal Homily* of Melito of Sardis.<sup>42</sup>

Whatever doubts there may be about its origins, the descent of Christ into Hell has been the source of a rich and varied literature, which includes Old English poems and homilies, mediaeval poems that begin to shade into drama, and the Harrowing plays in the mediaeval mystery cycles.<sup>43</sup> All these versions derive directly or indirectly from the 5<sup>th</sup> century '*Descensus Christi*' that formed the second part of the *Evangelium Nicodemi*.<sup>44</sup> Two men recently deceased are found in Jerusalem resurrected, and prevailed upon to write down their story.<sup>45</sup> They tell of the advent of Christ into the darkness of the underworld:

We then were in Hades, with all who had fallen asleep since the beginning of the world. And at the hour of midnight there rose a light as if of the sun, and shone into these dark [regions]; and we were all lighted up, and saw each other (p. 170).

Isaiah, John the Baptist, Adam and his son Seth compare prophecies and anticipate their promised release. The coming of the victorious Christ is heralded by lines from Psalm 24 that feature in all the Harrowing fictions:

Lift up your gates, O ye rulers; and be ye lifted up, ye everlasting gates; and the King of Glory shall come in.<sup>46</sup>

Hades asks 'Who is this king of glory?', and the antiphonal response from 'the angels of the Lord' – 'The Lord strong and mighty' - is sufficient to break the brazen gates and iron bars of Hell. 'All the dead who had been bound came out of the prisons, and we with them'.<sup>47</sup>



The English term 'Harrowing', from 'harrying', suggests a heroic and militaristic adventure, and implies that the *descensus* entailed some form of struggle or combat between Christ and the powers of darkness. In practice most of the Harrowing poems tend to endorse the views of those theologians who have interpreted the *descensus* as merely a demonstration of the Redemption already accomplished on the Cross, 'an efficacious outworking in the world beyond of what was accomplished in the temporality of history': 'in the Cross the power of Hell is already broken (down), the locked door of the grave is already burst open'.<sup>48</sup>

In the *Descensus Christi* the triumph is also a culmination of the combat already won on the Cross, and the emphasis in most of the Harrowing narratives falls on the ease with which the power of Christ compels the lords of the underworld to submit to his will. Here is Hades in the *Descensus Christi*:

What art thou, who comest here without sin, who art seen to be small and yet of great power, lowly and exalted, the slave and the master, the soldier and the king, who hast power over the dead and the living? (pp. 173-4)

'Small and yet of great power' conflates the entry into Jerusalem with the entry into Hell, the Passion with the Resurrection and Ascension. 'It is neither a question of a "struggle"', says von Balthasar, 'nor of a "descent", but of absolute plenary power'.<sup>49</sup> Jesus has Satan bound, and the hapless devil is roundly rebuked by Hades for messing things up in the land of the dead. Jesus raises Adam and calls to all the dead, 'as many as have died through the tree that he touched', the Tree of Knowledge: 'for behold, I again raise you all up through the tree of the cross'.<sup>50</sup> The dead are then delivered into Paradise, where they meet Enoch and Elijah, and (just arriving) the penitent thief. The flaming sword across the gates of Paradise is lowered in deference to the power of the Cross.

### ***HIS DARK MATERIALS***

The journey to the underworld in *His Dark Materials* is precipitated by the death of Lyra's friend Roger, which occurs at the end of the first novel *Northern Lights*. The

initial structure of Pullman's *descensus* narrative is therefore the classical search for a dead individual, one particular lost soul.

I thought maybe I could make amends if I went where he's gone and said I was sorry. (AS, p. 255)

Motivated by remorse and pity, Lyra seeks atonement. But ultimately her journey exceeds this particular sense of individual indebtedness, and leads her to the world-shaking decision to liberate all the dead from their confinement. The reader is seduced into believing that both Lyra and Will are to play a protagonist role in the War in heaven and the overthrow of the Authority. In practice both hero and heroine conclude their true destiny, the promise of all the prophecies concerning their actions, in the land of the dead, and in their decision to free the spirits of the dead from their captivity.

... What I got to do, Roger, what my destiny is, is I got to help all the ghosts out of the land of the dead for ever ... *Death is going to die*'. (AS, pp. 324-5)

Will's journey to hell, like that of Aeneas, was to find and consult the ghost of his father. But simultaneously with Lyra, Will apprehends that his task is much greater: to 'open this world and let the ghosts out. That's what I've got the knife for' (AS, p. 326). Their joint decision is to 'Harrow Hell': to lead forth a host of captives, and to bring about the death of death.

It is precisely at this point of the narrative, where the search for Roger is suddenly expanded into the vastly larger project of liberating all the dead, that we witness a transition from the classical journey to the underworld, to the Christian Harrowing of Hell. Lyra and Will jointly play the role of deliverer, 'redeemer and redemptrix',<sup>51</sup> or as Millicent Lenz describes Lyra, the 'Savior of humanity'.<sup>52</sup> Although Pullman's Land of the Dead clearly bears many similarities to the classical underworld, this vision of Hell being emptied was beyond the scope of the pagan imagination. Only Christianity with its revaluation of death could envisage an underworld from which the dead might hope to gain release. '*Death is going to die*'.<sup>53</sup>

## BREAKS IN PLANE

One of the fictional techniques facilitated by Pullman's universe of multiple worlds is that of linked parallel narratives. The device is used frequently, but the most striking example occurs at the opening of *The Amber Spyglass*, where Lyra in a drugged sleep dreams of the world of the dead. The two worlds are separate in fictional space as in actual space, the one typographically and paginally differentiated from the other; but in the child's imagination they approximate closely enough for communication to take place, through something like Eliade's 'break in the homogeneity of profane space'.

In fact this vision of Hell is more than a dream. On the one hand it is Lyra being visited by the ghost of Roger, much as Aeneas was visited by the ghost of Anchises. On the other hand, since the ghost remains *in situ* in the underworld, it is Lyra's spirit seeing into the abyss, coming close to the dead in their own locality.<sup>54</sup>

On a great plain where no light shone from the iron-dark sky, and where a mist obscured the horizon on every side. The ground was bare earth, beaten flat by the pressure of millions of feet, even though those feet had less weight than feathers; so it must have been time that pressed it flat, even though time had been stilled in this place; so it must have been they way things were. This was the end of all places and the last of all worlds. (AS, p. 9)

The underworld is a place without time, but also a 'non-place', 'the end of all places', 'last of all worlds' (AS, p. 9). Here Hell is a 'prison-camp', established by the Authority 'in the early ages' (AS, p. 35). It is a kind of Sheol, a 'holding area' (AS, p. 268), but it is also a place of punishment, where the ghosts are continually reminded of their transgressions by the Harpies, who have an intimate knowledge of the content of every conscience within their power. The dead thus live in a lamentable condition of remorse without hope. But not Roger.

... hopeless faces, dark faces, old faces, young faces, all the dead cramming and crowding close and silent and sorrowful. Roger's face was different. His expression was the only one that contained hope. (AS, p. 68)

His hope is based simply, and against all the evidence, on his faith in Lyra. Roger has also tried to disseminate his hope in Lyra as his promised deliverer, in much the same way as hopes of redemption are shared in the Harrowing stories by the inhabitants of Hell. 'Lyra'll do it, if anyone can' (AS, p. 325).

Pullman imagines the approach to Hell (the chapter is called 'The Suburbs of the Dead') almost as an epitome of Marc Auge's 'non-place': a 'refugee camp' (p. 265), a shanty town (p. 267), a border crossing ('a customs post on a rarely-visited frontier', p. 268). At the same time echoes of ancient Limbos and mediaeval Purgatories are linked with the post-industrial urban landscape and with a post-modern sense of meaningless 'non-place'. The dead here are waiting in a transit area between somewhere and nowhere, waiting indefinitely for an unpredictable departure.

Across the River Styx the children find themselves truly in Hell, a place designed for punishment and for the infliction of persistent suffering. The ghosts are crowded together, each tormented by the Harpies with continual reminders of their past misdeeds. The ghosts are described, as they are in Homer and Virgil, with 'as much substance as fog' (AS, p. 311), and Lyra's frustrated hands 'pass through them' as did the hands of Odysseus and Aeneas. But they respond to the presence of life, being drawn towards the living body, and especially towards living blood:

They crammed forward, light and lifeless, to warm themselves at the flowing blood and the strong-beating hearts of the two travellers, and both Will and Lyra felt a succession of cold delicate brushing sensations as the ghosts passed through their bodies, warming themselves on the way. (AS, p. 311)

Again Pullman echoes his classical sources, in this case Homer, but with a critical difference of emphasis. In Homer the blood of a sacrificed animal is used as bait to attract the ghosts, and to unlock their disused powers of speech. Life is offered to the unseen powers, as in pagan religion, as gift and propitiation; and drinking blood restores to voiceless ghosts the capability of living speech. By means of this sacrifice Odysseus is able to converse with the dead, hear their speech and report it back to his own listeners; and in turn the poet himself is able to transmit the substance of this

impossible conversation. Like Michelet, Homer too has 'drunk the black blood of the dead'.<sup>55</sup>

The key difference in Pullman's vision is that the ghosts are drawn not to the shed blood of a slaughtered ram, but to the warmth of living blood circulating in the bodies of the two children. Even more strikingly, Pullman imagines the spiritual bodies of the ghosts entering the bodies of the living and momentarily joining in that circulation, passing through the medium of life, seeking the pulse and beat of life-giving blood. Here there is an exchange of blood for spirit, which is closer to the language and symbology of the Christian Eucharist than it is to the pagan universe of Homer. In the Eucharist the blood poured out for many in the Passion is ritually reproduced in a living spiritual form that can be consumed by the communicant. Through Eucharistic body and blood the power of the spirit mingles with the warmth of the living body ('this mingling and blessing of the Body and Blood of Our Lord Jesus Christ').<sup>56</sup> The Eucharist is to some degree a memorial, a ritual of mourning, a communion with the dead; but it is also a meeting and mingling of living and dead, the dead past reinvigorated by ritualised speech, the dead heart quickened to life by the power of the spirit.

Thus Pullman has imagined not so much a neo-classical world of humanist virtues as a Eucharistic domain in which this exchange between life and death can take place. The Passion of Christ makes this encounter theologically possible, as in the novel it can happen only because Lyra has followed the calling of love and responsibility, though it draws her into the very depths of the abyss.<sup>57</sup> She converts the place of Hell into what Philip Sheldrake calls 'Eucharistic space', where 'being' is also giving, 'being a person-for-others', a 'costly reconciliation' that 'embraces an ethic of responsibility'.<sup>58</sup> Nor is Pullman at all averse to overt Christian references, as when the ghost of a young girl says to Lyra, 'you won't forget us when you go back, will you?' (AS, p. 328), recalling the Penitent Thief, whose promise of Paradise (Luke 23:42-4) rendered him a major character in Christian *descensus* stories. 'No', said Lyra, 'never ... I promise' (AS, p. 328). This day you will be with me in Paradise.

What Lyra and Will achieve in their Harrowing of Hell is 'the re-consecration of a desecrated place'. Philip Sheldrake's model for the process of re-consecration fits *His Dark Materials* exactly:

A true sense of the sacredness of the place that is our world has to be carved out of a process that begins with estrangement, passes through surrender and finally reaches re-creation.<sup>59</sup>

'Estrangement' is the entry into the world of the dead; 'surrender' is the decision to renounce love for the good of others; and 're-creation' is the destruction of death as a pre-ordained punishment.

To live sacramentally involves setting aside a damaged condition in favour of something that is offered to us by a grace for 'where we habitually are is not, after all, a neutral place but a place of loss and need' from which we need to be relocated.<sup>60</sup>

## TRUTH

Lyra disarms the Harpies, guardians of the underworld and tormentors of the dead, by telling 'true stories'. This injunction, repeated by the ghosts who emerge from Hell to embrace infinity, seems something of a Pullmanian manifesto. According to the logic of this ideology, his intention in writing a modern version of the Harrowing of Hell would be to use the traditional narrative resources of religion to tell a truer story than the Christian one about death and the dead. That story is the account given by science, that death is virtually immediate dispersal of the elements of body and spirit, a surrender of the physical being to total annihilation. As Wood observes, 'Pullman grounds his fantasy in contemporary science',<sup>61</sup> and his novels certainly adumbrate a context of popular scientific knowledge: quantum theory, dark matter, multiple universes.<sup>62</sup> In fact Pullman's version of death, if it is that, is somewhat less than scientific, since it is imbued with a romantic pantheism in which atoms disperse from a living body at the point of death, but then retain some form of human identity and even the capacity for human relationship. They are envisaged as becoming part of nature ('part of everything alive', AS, p. 335), but also of gravitating towards one

another in a persistence of human desire, retaining human identity and relationship ('Every atom of you and every atom of me', *AS*, p. 526).

But surely the 'truth' of story is not the same as the 'truth' of science, truths that are commonly thought of rather as opposites. Scientific theories and arguments about the finality of death have their own persuasiveness. I know however of no scientific account of death that uses such mythical, fictional and theological materials to prove that there is no immortality. The truth of Pullman's fiction is not the truth of science, but rather a form of aesthetic and imaginative truth that trespasses on the ground of theology. If *His Dark Materials* is a true story, then its investment in the journey to the underworld and the Harrowing of Hell is part of the truth it tells. The dead are still there, somewhere, and we are responsible for them, responsible to them. If our strongest moral imperative is to help those who cannot help themselves, then we will always be drawn to those powerless ones, the *rafa'im*, who need more than tears and an urn, who need our prayers, our blessings, our memories, our rituals of mourning. And we will always employ the full power of the imagination to envision the possibility of a 'place' where the dead might be found.

The space of Philip Pullman's fiction is analogous to Mircea Eliade's 'sacred space'. To enter it is to cross a threshold from the ordinary to the enchanted. The place the reader then finds him or herself in is an aperture, a horizon, a place filled with 'images of an opening'. Pullman's primary fictional method is to invent ways of effecting a 'break in plane', so 'communication between the cosmic planes' becomes possible. In particular he opens that space between the worlds of the living and the land of the dead. Pullman also defines human 'being' as nomadic, never quite at home, restless and hungry for elsewhere. This is more than existentialist alienation, because what draws Pullman's protagonist into the cosmic diaspora of the nomadic is Sheldrake's 'ethic of responsibility', Derrida's 'responsibility of the living', 'before the ghosts of those who are not yet born or who are already dead'.

In constructing his modern version of the harrowing of Hell, Pullman may have been 'trying to undermine the basis of Christian belief',<sup>63</sup> by attempting to fashion a new anti-religious counter-myth of death and the dead, a 'secular liberation narrative' expressing an 'emancipatory and "natural" humanism'.<sup>64</sup> But despite his intention, as

Gooderham puts it, to ‘bend the old myth to a new secular purpose’, the old myth bites back.<sup>65</sup> ‘In order to attack religion’, says Rayment-Pickard, ‘Pullman ends up telling a religious story’. ‘Like all artistic transgressors’ he goes on, ‘Pullman pays homage to the sacred power that he seeks to overcome’. Pullman calls himself a ‘Christian atheist’:<sup>66</sup> ultimately he remains ‘secretly in love with theology and the theological re-enchantment of the world’.<sup>67</sup> He hovers on the threshold of the church because it is the church, not the ideology of secularism, that centres both the worlds of heaven and hell. Pullman is an anti-metaphysician who has nonetheless, to adapt Nietzsche’s phrase, lit his fire from the Christian flame. The reason he writes at liberty when writing of devils and Hell, and in fetters when writing of secular humanism, is that he is of God’s party, without knowing it.

<sup>1</sup> Mircea, Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: the nature of religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovitch, 1959), p. 25.

<sup>2</sup> Marc Auge, *Non-lieux: introduction a une anthropologie de la surmodernite* (Paris: Editions de Seuil, 1992); *Non-places: introduction to an anthropology of supermodernity*, trans. John Howe (London: Verso, 1995), pp. 77-8.

<sup>3</sup> Auge accepts that the two kinds of space frequently overlap: ‘the first never totally erased, the second never totally completed’. Auge, *Non-places*, p. 79.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 78, p. 119.

<sup>5</sup> Albert Rouet, *Art et Liturgie* (Paris: Desclee de Brouwer, 1992), p. 95.

<sup>6</sup> Eliade, *Sacred*, p. 21.

<sup>7</sup> Philip Sheldrake, *Places for the Sacred: place, memory and identity* (London: SCM Press, 2001), p. 54.

<sup>8</sup> Eliade, *Sacred*, p. 63.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 21.

<sup>10</sup> Sheldrake, *Places*, p. 37.

<sup>11</sup> John Bunyan, *Bunyan’s Whole Allegorical Works: Comprising The Pilgrim’s Progress in Three Parts*, ed. Thomas Scott (Glasgow: A Fullerton, 1839), p. 135.

<sup>12</sup> Rouet, *Art*, p. 86.

<sup>13</sup> Sheldrake, *Places*, p. 51. ‘L’église chretienne n’est ni une sale de classe, ni une sale de spectacle. Elle est un lieu oriente’ (Rouet, *Art*, p. 86).

<sup>14</sup> Rouet, *Art*, p. 95.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. p. 95. See Sheldrake, *Places*, p. 52.

<sup>16</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Mystic Fable* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1992), p. 299.

<sup>17</sup> Sheldrake, *Places*, p. 64.

<sup>18</sup> T.S. Eliot, ‘The Dry Salvages’, *Collected Poems 1909-1962* (London: Faber and Faber, 1936, repr. 1961), pp. 212-213.

<sup>19</sup> Hans Sedlmayer, quoted Eliade, *Sacred*, pp. 61-2.

<sup>20</sup> The church is ‘un espace d’hommage et de reconnaissance’. Rouet, *Art*, p. 94.

<sup>21</sup> Eliade, *Sacred*, p. 26.

<sup>22</sup> Ellis Bell [Emily Bronte], ‘Stanzas’, in Currer Bell [Charlotte Bronte], *The Professor, to which are added the Poems of Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell: now first collected* (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1860), p. 420.

<sup>23</sup> Philip Pullman, *Northern Lights* (London: Scholastic, 1995, repr. 1998); *The Subtle Knife* (London: Scholastic, 1997, repr. 1998); *The Amber Spyglass* (London: Scholastic, 2000, repr. 2001). All quotations from the trilogy are referenced in-text as *NL*, *SK* and *AS*.

<sup>24</sup> Pullman’s views on Gnosticism are expounded in discussion with Archbishop Rowan Williams in Robert Butler, *Darkness Illuminated: Platform Discussion on ‘His Dark Materials’ at the National Theatre* (London: National Theatre/Oberon Books, 2004). See also Tony Watkins, *Dark Matter: a*



*Thinking Fan's Guide to Philip Pullman* (Southampton: Damaris, 2004), pp. 223-5; Naomi Wood, 'Paradise Lost and Found: Obedience, Disobedience, and Storytelling in C.S. Lewis and Philip Pullman', *Children's Literature in Education*, 32:4 (2001), pp. 237-259; Bernard Schweizer "'And He's A-Going to Destroy Him": Religious Subversion in Pullman's *His Dark Materials*', and Mary Harris Russell, "'Eve, Again! Mother Eve!": Pullman's Eve Variations', in *His Dark Materials Illuminated: Critical Essays on Philip Pullman's Trilogy*, edited by Millicent Lenz with Carole Scott (Wayne State University Press, 2005), pp. 160-73 and 212-222.

<sup>25</sup> See for example Anne-Marie Bird, "'Without Contraries is no Progression": Dust as an All-inclusive, Multifunctional Metaphor in Philip Pullman's "His Dark Materials"', *Children's Literature in Education*, 32:2 (2001), pp. 111-123; Wood, 'Paradise', pp. 237-259; David Gooderham, 'Fantasizing it As It Is: Religious language in Philip Pullman's Trilogy, *His Dark Materials*', *Children's Literature*, 31 (2003), pp. 155-75; Hugh Rayment-Pickard, *The Devil's Account: Philip Pullman and Christianity* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2004); Santiago Colas, 'Telling True Stories, or the Immanent Ethics of Material Spirit (and Spiritual Matter) in Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials*', *Discourse*, 27:1 (2005), pp. 34-66.

<sup>26</sup> Wood, 'Paradise', p. 243.

<sup>27</sup> Bird, 'Without Contraries', p. 116.

<sup>28</sup> Wood, 'Paradise', p. 112.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 251.

<sup>30</sup> Millicent Lenz, 'Philip Pullman', in *Alternative Worlds in Fantasy Fiction*, eds. Peter Hunt and Millicent Lenz (London: Continuum, 2001), pp. 122-69. See pp. 126 and 133.

<sup>31</sup> Pullman derived Metatron from the apocryphal *Book of Enoch* via Harold Bloom's *Omens of Millennium: the Gnosis of Angels, Dreams and Resurrection* (NY: Riverhead Books, 1996, pp. 44-53). Pullman does not explore the very interesting contrast between Enoch's visit to Hell in the Ethiopian *Book of Enoch*, and the Christian Harrowing stories. Hans Urs von Balthasar affirms that 'the theologoumenon of the Hades journey of Christ has as its model the myth of Enoch'. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale: the mystery of Easter*, trans. Aiden Nichols (Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1990), p. 160.

<sup>32</sup> Jurgen Pieters, *Speaking with the Dead: explorations in literature and history* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2005), p. 2.

<sup>33</sup> Quoted from Roland Barthes, *Michelet*, trans. Richard Howard (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), p. 102. French original in Jules Michelet, *Journal*, vol. I (1828-48), ed. P. Vialleneix (Paris: Gallimard, 1959), p. 378.

<sup>34</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx: the state of the debt, the work of mourning and the new international*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York and London: Routledge, 1994), p. 4.

<sup>35</sup> In Latin the ghost is 'imago', image or likeness.

<sup>36</sup> *The Metamorphoses of Ovid*, trans. Michael Simpson (Amherst: Massachusetts UP, 2001), p. 166.

<sup>37</sup> J.G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough: a study in magic and religion*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, Pt IV, vol. 1 (London: Macmillan, 1936), p. 8. The Babylonian word for hell, 'Aralu' means literally 'land of no return'.

<sup>38</sup> See the Catholic homily for Holy Saturday: 'He has gone to search for Adam, our first father, as for a lost sheep'. 'The Lord's Descent into Hell', *Liturgical Year*, Holy See [available at [http://www.vatican.va/spirit/documents/spirit\\_20010414\\_omelia-sabato-santo\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/spirit/documents/spirit_20010414_omelia-sabato-santo_en.html)] [accessed 6 June 2007]

<sup>39</sup> von Balthasar, *Mysterium*, p. 151.

<sup>40</sup> 'The Creed of the Fourth Synod of Sirmium, 359', in *Creeds and Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Valerie Hotchkiss, vol. 1 (London: Yale University Press, 2003) p. 98. See also 'The Creed of Constantinople, 360': 'he was buried and descended to the lower world (at whom hell itself quailed)'. *Ibid.*, p. 99.

<sup>41</sup> 'The Roman Symbol, 2<sup>nd</sup> century'. Pelikan and Hotchkiss, *Creeds*, p. 682 (translation of Rufinus).

<sup>42</sup> 'I am the Christ. It is I who destroyed death, who triumphed over the enemy, who trampled Hades underfoot, who bound the strong one and snatched man away to the heights of heaven; I am the Christ.' Stuart G. Hall, *Melito of Sardis: On Pascha and Fragments* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 59.

<sup>43</sup> *The Book of Cerne*, ed. Michelle Brown (London: British Library and University of Toronto Press, 1996); *The York Harrowing of Hell*, ed. W.A. Davenport (Egham: Royal Holloway, 1997); *A Critical Edition of the Exeter Book 'Descent into Hell'*, ed. Thomas N. Hall (Waco, Texas: Baylor University, 1985); *The Middle English Harrowing of Hell and Gospel of Nicodemus*, ed. William Henry Hulme (London: EETS, Kegan Paul, Trench Trubner and Co., 1907); *The Prayer-Book of Aedelwald the Bishop Commonly called the Book of Cerne*, ed. Dom. A.B. Kuypers (Cambridge: Cambridge

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University Press, 1902); *The Chester Mystery Cycle*, ed. R.M. Lumiansky (London: EETS, Oxford University Press, 1974); *The Exeter Book of Old English Poetry*, facsimile (London: Percy Lund, Humphries and Co. 1933); *The York Cycle of Mystery Plays: a complete version*, ed. J.S. Purvis (London: SPCK, 1957).

<sup>44</sup> *The Gospel of Nicodemus*, *Ante-Nicene Christian Library*, vol. 16 gives translations of Greek and Latin texts. One of the Latin texts with its Old English translation can be found in *Two Old English Apocrypha and their Manuscript Sources*, ed. J.E. Cross (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

<sup>45</sup> In the Greek version they are identified only as 'the sons of Symeon', and simply write down their story. In the first Latin version they are Karinus and Leucius, and they appear to be speechless, calling for paper and ink to write down their story. In the second Latin version they have been forbidden to speak by the Holy Spirit, and hence write down their story. The two men write independently, but produce exactly the same text.

<sup>46</sup> Psalm 24: 7. 'Lift up your heads, O ye gates; and be ye lift up, ye everlasting doors; and the King of Glory shall come in'.

<sup>47</sup> *Gospel of Nicodemus*, p. 173.

<sup>48</sup> Von Balthasar, *Mysterium*, p. 156, p. 151.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 156.

<sup>50</sup> *Gospel of Nicodemus*, p. 174.

<sup>51</sup> Gooderham, 'Fantasizing', p. 170.

<sup>52</sup> Lenz, 'Philip Pullman', p. 134.

<sup>53</sup> 'O death, I will be your death; Sheol, I will be your destruction'. *Morning and Evening Prayer, with Night Prayer, from the Divine Office* (London: Collins, 1976), p. 204.

<sup>54</sup> 'Dead people had a special role in Christianity by joining two worlds together'. Sheldrake, *Places*, p. 48.

<sup>55</sup> Michelet quoted Pieters, *Speaking*, p. 94.

<sup>56</sup> 'Ordinary of the Mass', *Daily Missal* (Birmingham: C. Goodliffe Neale, 1956), p. 572.

<sup>57</sup> 'Not so much "responsibility *for*" the other ... but "responsibility *with*", others in a common life within the Body of Christ. This includes a sense of co-responsibility and a mutual calling each of the other to the responsibility and obligations of love.' Sheldrake, *Places*, p. 77.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 77.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 76.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 76. The quotation is from Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), pp. 209-10.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 246.

<sup>62</sup> The science-religion debate in the novels is a rigged contest, since Pullman's science is from the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, while his church is a strange 17<sup>th</sup> century institution, not unlike the Opus Dei of Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*, that consists mainly of inquisitions, witch-hunts and fanatical assassins.

<sup>63</sup> Quoted Watkins, *Dark Matter*, p. 16.

<sup>64</sup> Gooderham, 'Fantasizing', pp. 162-3.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 170.

<sup>66</sup> Kathleen Odean, 'The Story Master', *School Library Journal* (1 October 2000).

<sup>67</sup> Rayment-Pickard, *Devil's Account*, pp. 3, 19.